

Jermain Taylor To Fight On, Dibella Bids Him Adieu

Written by George Kimball
Thursday, 10 December 2009 18:00

CHICAGO -- Sometimes even more than its eponymous president himself, Jermain Taylor was the veritable face of DiBella Entertainment.

He might not have been Lou DiBella's first world champion -- Bernard Hopkins was - but he was the first he'd developed from square one. DiBella had signed Taylor straight out of the Olympics and promoted his entire career, watched a kid who'd never had a pro fight become a man who won the undisputed middleweight championship of the world, and if their personal relationship wasn't exactly father-son, it was at the very least uncle-nephew, and when Lou said he "loved" Jermain, you believed him.

This is a sport in which the term "bloodsucking promoter" often seems redundant, but when DiBella severed his relationship with Taylor on a cold Friday afternoon in Chicago yesterday, it was a move borne of conscience alone. Rather than be a party to what he considered the "unnecessary risk" of Taylor's continuing to box, DiBella walked away and left more than half a million dollars on the table.

Ask yourself this: How many other promoters would have done the same?

It has been clear since the night of October 17 that DiBella would never promote another Taylor fight. After sitting up all night watching his fighter wander in and out of consciousness in a Berlin hospital, the promoter extracted a promise from Taylor that he would hang up his gloves. No announcement was made at that time because DiBella wanted to give the guy who had once been the middleweight champ the opportunity to retire gracefully, on his own terms, and with any explanation he wanted to offer.

The two have not met face to face since they parted in Germany. DiBella flew back to the states. Jermain Taylor stayed behind. It was announced that he wanted to spend a week touring Europe with his wife. The truth of the matter is that the German doctors who treated Taylor for the concussion administered by Arthur Abraham warned that it would be dangerous for him to get on an airplane.

Make of that what you will. Once Taylor got to the hospital that night, the staff neurologists -- as opposed to the boxing buffs with kit bags who pass for "ringside physicians" in that country -- were sufficiently concerned that they put him on a round-the-clock watch. It is our understanding that Taylor underwent multiple MRIs. We know he passed the last one, else he would not have been released. But what about the others?

By the time they parted company in Berlin, DiBella's mind was already made up that this was it. If Taylor ever boxed again, it would not be under the aegis of his company. This understanding was as clear to Taylor that morning as it was to DiBella.

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In the nearly two months since, there had been increasing rumblings emanating from Little Rock that Taylor was wavering on his pledge. The rumors were a matter of sufficient concern that in Atlantic City last Saturday night, DiBella found himself huddled together with Taylor advisor Al Haymon as they tried to figure out a means of heading off the comeback plans without embarrassing Taylor.

The matter was already producing a schism within the camp. Manager Ozell Nelson, who had returned to the corner as trainer after the tenures of Patrick Burns and Emanuel Steward, was working with Taylor in Arkansas, and of course the Little Rock homeys who comprise Jermain's inner circle down there were foursquare behind their man -- for pretty much the same reasons that Muhammad Ali's entire entourage, with the exception of Dr. Ferdie Pacheco, who had walked away, not only abetted but encouraged Ali's participation in that ill-fated 1980 fight against Larry Holmes.

On the way from O'Hare to downtown Chicago yesterday, the wife of one of Taylor's closest friends confirmed to me that Jermain had decided to keep boxing and would reaffirm his place in the ongoing "Super Six" super-middleweight tournament, and hours later, Taylor repeated that intention to another website.

So by five o'clock Friday in Chicago, DiBella was making an announcement of his own -- that he was out, recusing himself as Taylor's promoter. When he had signed him out of the 2000 Olympics, DiBella had promised the fighter that he would leave the game with his faculties intact, and he had promised the same thing to Jermain's mother two months ago in Berlin. Now that that prospect had assumed proportions of an unacceptable risk, DiBella felt that he could not in good conscience function as an enabler.

It should probably be noted that even today, Taylor would probably be DiBella Entertainment's most marketable client, and that by walking away right now, Lou DiBella is out between \$500,000 and \$600,000 he stood to collect just for passing 'Go.'

Obviously, DiBella could use the money, but after what he has seen he seems to feel that he can't comfortably condone the notion of Jermain Taylor continuing to box.

All of us, of course, have seen Taylor lose four of his last five fights and get knocked out in three of them. But what we haven't seen is Taylor's alarming behavior in the locker room once he regained consciousness -- behavior so erratic and so indicative of possible frontal lobe damage that an ambulance was summoned.

And what we haven't seen, either, are the results of the several MRIs administered in the hospital that night. While that information is shrouded in medical confidentiality issues, Taylor's post-concussive state should be a matter of extreme concern for whatever jurisdiction considers licensing him again.

As of last night, Al Haymon planned to fly to Arkansas in a last-ditch effort to discourage Taylor's comeback plans. If he is unsuccessful, it will be interesting to see whether he follows DiBella out the door.

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The current Super Six schedule calls for Taylor to fight Andre Ward in April. No site has been named, but it is a reasonable assumption that a pairing of two Americans would take place in the United States. Whichever commission winds up with this one in its lap needs to take a long, hard look at the situation.

And so, for that matter, does Showtime. Before this tournament even began, we had expressed our reservations about the whole concept of a "knockout bonus" and suggested that it could lead to something like this. We'd even noted that if they were going to award one point or a knockout, why not two for putting the opponent in the hospital, and three if you managed to kill him.

That had been intended as sarcasm, but now we may get a chance to find out.

As the creators, sponsors, and bankrollers of of this enterprise, the people at Showtime are uniquely posited in this case. If Jermain Taylor can pass a brain scan in March, even the most circumspect boxing commission might legally have difficulty denying him a license, but Showtime can, and should, go one step further.

The network can't demand that the Germans hand over confidential medical information, for instance, but they can, and should, take Jermain Taylor aside and ask that he obtain the neurological reports from that night, and make the information available to them. They could, and should, make that a condition of his continued participation in the tournament.

And if they don't, they must share in the responsibility for the consequences.

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TEXT OF DiBELLA ENTERTAINMENT's OFFICIAL STATEMENT ON JERMAIN TAYLOR:

I have just been informed though numerous press reports that Jermain Taylor has elected to continue his participation in The Super Six: World Boxing Classic tournament, and will face Andre Ward in April. It is with a heavy heart, but strong conviction, that I will recuse myself and DiBella Entertainment as Jermain's promoter.

"Jermain's career has been outstanding, and it has been a pleasure and honor to promote him. His victories against Bernard Hopkins remain the highlights of my career as a promoter. Jermain is not only a great fighter, but a good and decent man with a wonderful family. It is out of genuine concern for him and his family that I am compelled to make this decision.

"I informed him, as I do all my contracted fighters, that my goal was to help his secure financial stability for his family, maximize his potential, and leave our unforgiving sport with his health intact.

"It is my belief that the continuation of Jermain's career as an active fighter places him at unnecessary risk. While he is undoubtedly capable of prevailing in future bouts, I cannot,

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in conscience, remain involved given my assessment of such risk.

“I wish Jermain all the best in his future endeavors. All of us at DiBella Entertainment hold Jermain close to our hearts and consider him and his family part of our family. We wish him Godspeed and continued health.

-- Lou DiBella